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OBSTRUCTING AUTHENTICITY: THE CHURCH AND SEXUALITY IN RANDALL KENAN'S *A VISITATION OF SPIRITS* AND JEANETTE WINTERSON'S *ORANGES ARE NOT THE ONLY FRUIT*

Kyesha L. Jennings

North Carolina A&T State University

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department: English

Major: English and African American Literature

Major Professor: Dr. Michele Levy

Greensboro, North Carolina

2011

School of Graduate Studies

North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University

This is to Certify that the Master's Thesis of

Kyesha L. Jennings

has met the thesis requirements of

North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University

Greensboro, North Carolina

2011

Approved by:

Michele Levy Major Professor	Jason Depolo Committee Member
Gibreel Kamara Committee Member	Faye Spencer-Maor Department Chairperson

Dr. Sanjiv Sarin
Associate Vice Chancellor for Research and Graduate Dean

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2011

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Dawn, Naomi, Lashunn, Grandpa, and Grandmommy and Pop—I am living proof that it takes a village to raise a child and I love and thank you all.

Also, to Nakia. Thanks for being a great listener and encouraging me at all times. You are loved and appreciated.

Biographical Sketch

Kyesha L. Jennings was born on December 29, 1988, in Jamaica, NY. After graduating from Francis Lewis High School, in Fresh Meadows, NY, she attended The Lincoln University of Pennsylvania—the first historically black college. At Lincoln, she earned her Bachelor's of Science degree in Secondary English Education in May of 2010. She is a candidate for the Master of Arts in English and African-American Literature from North Carolina A&T State University. She is a member of Sigma Tau Delta, the national English honors society.

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Abstract

The dominant beliefs of a society determine what it finds acceptable and socially constructed theories generally valorize only heterosexism. Thus, global society has viewed homosexuality as a repudiation of the norm—an aberration, a disease, or a "lifestyle"—all of which carry negative social connotations. While this particularly characterizes churches within the African American community, identical issues occur within other denominations of Christianity. This study will explore literary texts that display how the Christian church, more specifically the Baptist and Pentecostal denominations, obstruct homosexuals' identity by implementing a limited, rigid morality that rejects all who do not fit within its code, a dynamic that impedes the individual's search for authenticity (here taken to mean one's full being). After first examining the general beliefs of the church, with a particular emphasis on the black church, I will then juxtapose the semi-autobiographical texts of Randall Kenan and Jeanette Winterson, *A Visitation of Spirits* and *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit*. For Kenan, an African-American gay male, and Winterson, a White British lesbian, personalize complex societal issues while explicitly describing their protagonists' journey towards an authentic life.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

As defined by Annamarie Jagose, homosexuality is "understood to describe sexual attraction for those of one's own sex" (7). The word itself has multiple resonances. Her introduction in *Queer Theory* makes a distinction between homosexuality as a sexual act and homosexuality as a sexual identity. According to Jagose, homosexuality as a sexual act refers to both men and women who practice homosexual behaviors (intimacy involving two or more parties of the same sex). However, these individuals do not identify themselves as homosexual or as belonging to the homosexual community. According to Jagose, homosexuality as a sexual identity is a modern term that describes a way of being in the world (12). This thesis will utilize the latter term when referring to homosexuality—stressing sexual identity rather than merely sexual behavior.

Many have theorized when homosexuality was invented or developed. French philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault suggested that the history of homosexuality began in 1870, implying that before this period, conversations about sex in the West were nonexistent, or better yet, kept secret (Jagose 3). Disputing Foucault, Alan Bray declared that the term emerged much earlier in the late seventeenth century with the establishment of Molly houses—places where men gathered to engage in homosexual acts with other men. According to Bray, Molly houses differed from similar places where men engaged in homosexual acts due to their community setting:

> Places for procuring sex with other men had existed previously but they were not as coherent as the system of Molly houses, which constituted a community within a community, a specifically homosexual culture. Though small and discreet, a culture

> began to develop, which had its own way of dressing, of talking, distinctive gestures and distinctive acts with an understood meaning and its own jargon. (Jagose 12)

Ironically, the homosexual culture within Molly houses is identical to the modern 21st century homosexual culture that we are aware of today. Homosexuals have their own way of dressing, talking, and distinctive gestures and acts with understood meaning, although one must point out that not *every* homosexual falls within these specific boundaries. Like Foucault, gay historian John D'Emilio suggests that homosexuality developed in the late 19th century. His Marxist approach argues that the historical development of capitalism generated the necessary conditions for a homosexual identity (Jagose 12). Before the 18th century, the idea of a homosexual as a person had never occurred. It was seen as being not a fundamental part of a person, but rather an action that one undertook.

Despite theorists' inability to agree upon an exact date for the birth of the term, homosexuality has existed throughout history in all types of society and among all social classes and people. What has varied enormously are the ways in which various societies have regarded homosexuality, the meanings they have attached to it, and how those who engage in homosexual activity view themselves (Weeks 212). Louis Crompton's *Homosexuality & Civilization* examines the development of homosexuality in different cultures around the world, revealing various ways in which homosexuality has been perceived and judge. In any case, 20th century work in psychology has shown us that one's sexual identity is fundamental to one's personal identity. Jane Kroger, a professor of psychology, suggests that "defining one's self as male or female and integrating one's emerging sexual identity with one's sense of personal identity is an important task" (69). Further, Jan Steutel and Ben Spiecker have declared in "Sexual identity and

Moral Virtuousness" that they regard one's sexual identity as an aspect of one's personal identity (Steutel and Spiecker 151).

The history of sex in general, and homosexuality in particular, remained a mystery until historians complained about what historian and sociologist Jeffery Weeks identified as the "virgin field". According to Weeks, this then led to the exploration of its history. Meanwhile, although many historians and sociologists, including Weeks, Foucault, D'Emilio and Bray, have contributed to the field, Bray has reported that the study of homosexuality and sexuality remains outside the interest of most historians (Bray 2). Here we must also note that the evolving definitions of sexuality, as well as the shifting relationship between sexuality and class, have affected historians' research. The term itself is newly developed; therefore any attempt to trace its history has proven to be difficult. As D'Emilio and Freedman argue, "In contemporary era, Americans have come to use "sexuality" to refer to the erotic . . . In the past however, there was no language of sexuality per se" ("Problem" 482).

Just as historians have discussed and addressed homosexuality, so scholars in other disciplines have added their input to the discussion, examining such topics as "the emergence of sexual identities; the development of communities and the claiming of public space; and the growth of a homosexual freedom movement" (D'Emilio 451). More specifically, gay writers have chosen to explore the politics of sexuality by revealing through their literature the oppression of gays, which is often personalized. Theoretical materials produced by historians are concerned with tracing the historical development of what is understood as "homosexuality" today, whereas sociological theoreticians focus on identifying the role of sex, sexuality and homosexuality in specific cultures. In all, the goal for historians, sociologist and writers is to understand homosexuality in terms of its shifting history and within particular societies.

Weeks asserts that until recently little attention was paid to the study of homosexuality, and that existing studies focused more on male than female homosexuality (218). To that end, and with the intent of adding another voice to the discussion, I here juxtapose the experiences of opposite genders, more specifically, a black gay male and a white lesbian female. I will examine how the beliefs of the Baptist and Pentecostal denominations of the Christian church, both of which condemn homosexuality, constitute a powerful roadblock to the development of a homosexual's identity. First I will explore the actual policies and behaviors of these churches and their respective communities, as well as the way in which the black church imposes a triple consciousness on the homosexual male, which further exacerbates his struggle toward selfhood (My use of the term "black church" identifies members of the black community who worship within a predominantly black religious setting). Finally, I will analyze the semi-autobiographical texts of Randall Kenan and Jeanette Winterson, *A Visitation of Spirits and Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit,* both of which represent protagonists who ultimately assert their homosexual identities and identify with the homosexual community. Kenan and Winterson narrate the journeys of their homosexual protagonists towards self-identification as they confront the rigidity of church policies and tenets. Moreover, while the two protagonists contrast in gender, ethnicity and race both experience a similar marginalization. I will frame the experience of each protagonist's journey individually before juxtaposing the two to analyze their commonalities in terms of identity-formation. In conclusion, I intend to show how the beliefs of the church and members of its community impact both protagonists negatively, making their quests for self far more difficult, and how, at last, both characters resolve their conflicts between their committed homosexual identity and their valued religious identity.

Let us first examine the background history of the Christian Church's theological views on homosexuality. The overall beliefs on homosexuality in general and the homosexual in particular typically emerge within religious scriptures. Though it is known that the Bible does not make reference specifically to homosexuality, anti-homosexual Christians have used interpretation of certain scriptures to assert that God has declared homosexuality wrong. Yet as shown below, these beliefs are justified on moral grounds, based on the Christian's perception of homosexual behaviors. That begs the question, "Is homosexuality immoral because the Bible says so?" The most popular argument regarding God's view on homosexuality argues that the highest authority, the Bible, declares all homosexual acts to be sinful. Second, some argue that homosexuality is contrary to nature, opposing God's destiny for men and women to unite.

Let us briefly explore and analyze specific examples from the Bible that people often read and interpret to fit their anti-gay beliefs. Robert J. Gagnon attempts to discredit the myths regarding Jesus' perception of homosexuality in his article "The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Key Issues." While some believe Jesus lowered the bar on issues of sexual ethics, Gagnon challenges these claims. He declares that Jesus' emphasis in Genesis on the union of male and female as man and wife with the goal to merge as one flesh proves his disapproval of homosexuality. However, this claim, like others in the Bible, rests upon questionable assumptions. For example, the Bible states, "Thy woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abominations unto the Lord thy God" (Deut 22:5). This statement disapproves of any homosexual act of cross-dressing. Therefore, according to the Bible, any sex who wishes to dress in the clothing of the opposite sex is a disgrace to God.

Prior to the New Testament, homosexuality was viewed as uncleanness, not a sin. "A man shall not lie with a male as with a woman. It is an abomination, and the penalty is death" (Lev 18:22, 20:13). According to the Old Testament, a sin is a "conscious, intentional, personal attitude and act" (qtd. in. Via 5). This literal definition of a sin identifies homosexuality as both unintentional *and* unconscious, debunking all accusations of proclivity. For, if homosexuality is *not a sin* (according to the Old Testament), then it cannot fall under that specific category of "conscious and intentional," which thus makes it unconscious and unintentional. The New Testament, however, disregards the notion of uncleanness, re-categorizing homosexuality as a sin. According to Dan O. Via, author and professor of Theology, "Paul reinterprets homosexuality as a sin rather than as uncleanness . . . nothing is unclean for Paul, but homosexuality for him is sinful. It issues from the distorted mind and heart and is personal, chosen, immoral and against God" (Via 10). This reinterpretation devalues the beliefs of the Bible. If it can be reinterpreted once, why is it that it cannot be reinterpreted *again*? Furthermore, does this reinterpretation suggest that other controversial topics within the Bible such as premarital sex or divorce may be reinterpreted? As D'Emilio and Freedman have acknowledged, the issue of interpretation still involves many more questions than answers (490). I would point out here that whether Paul labeled homosexuality as unclean or a sin, he did not condemn or mention romantic love and sexual relations between people of the same sex. Further, Paul never commented on sexual orientation. As in the rest of the Bible, Paul nowhere even hinted that those whom today we would refer to as lesbians and gay men could or should change their sexual orientation.

We should note that the words *homosexual* and *homosexuality* do not appear in early versions of the Bible. The authors of that text did not understand the term *sexual orientation,* and

as previously noted the former terms were yet to be developed. In his article "The Bible and Homosexuality," J. Glenn Taylor found it necessary to avoid both terms, arguing that "the term 'homosexuality' does not match well with the way in which the Bible itself addresses the issue". Taylor points out that homosexuality can refer to a condition or an inclination apart from the acting-out of sexual relations, whereas the Bible does not recognize this distinction but normally speaks rather in terms of same-sex sexual relations (4). Simply put, the present understanding of homosexuality does not align with the Bible's understanding of homosexuality. Homosexuality within the Bible often related to rape or prostitution.

While some Christians use the Bible as a tool to condemn homosexuals, others have adopted a very different position. Thus, for example, Reverend Paget King's article, "The Church and the Homosexual," attempts to identify or create a balance between the two opposing sides. King notes that many homosexual and bisexual individuals desire to continue to practice religion but are "merely driven away from the church" (8). While he agrees that the Christian church views any sexual act that does not lead to conception as a crime against the nation and therefore a sin against God, King maintains that despite his belief in the teachings of the church, he opposes condemning groups of people—homosexuals in particular. He responds, "Why should we condemn the homosexual and not the fornicator? Why should we condemn anyone? Christ condemned hypocrisy. . . But hypocrisy seems to be regarded as virtue today" (King 8-9). Reverend King seeks to deter discrimination against any group of people regardless of their race, gender or sexual orientation, a position that this thesis implicitly endorses. While my argument makes no attempt to discredit the church's beliefs, it does intend to show how contemporary Christianity as practiced within specific communities discriminates against and marginalizes others based on their sexual orientation.

We must now explore the "Black Church" and homosexuality. Members of the black church utilize the Bible as a tool for oppression just as do other races, ethnicities and Christian religious denominations. The difference between the black church and those "others" is the experience of oppression and negative stereotypes they share with homosexuals. Research has shown that Black Americans are less approving of homosexuality than their White counterparts (Pitt 39). During the civil rights movement, blacks were heavily oppressed by white Christians who used the Bible as a tool to separate, negate and marginalize them. Yet, ironically, the black church's oppression of homosexuals mirrors what they experienced for so many years. Earl Hutchinson argues that homophobia and racism are two sides of the same coin: discriminating against anyone because of one's sexual preference mirrors the behavior of a white racist.

But what underlies this exaggerated behavior on the part of the black church and community likely relates less to religious beliefs than to the specific cultural history African Americans experienced, which has fostered a particular vision of black masculinity that sees the black male as the aggressor, protector and provider. Examining the Black man, Richard Pitt asserts:

> Like the larger culture in which it is embedded, the Black community believes the "real men" are gainfully employed, provided for and maintain leadership in their homes, and in other ways are able to exhibit control over their own destiny. Black manhood, then, depends on the men's ability to be a provider, progenitor, and protector . . . the performance of black masculinity becomes predicated on a particular performance of black sexuality. If sexuality remains one of the few ways that Black men can recapture masculinity . . . endorsing Black homosexuality subverts the cultural project of reinscribing masculinity within the Black community. (40)

Although all male homosexuals do not appear effeminate, the black community continues to ostracize them. Hence, a black male's identification with the homosexual community negates his identity as a black man and a Christian. This results in men who "pass" as heterosexual while often living a double life. These men are usually referred to as "down low brothers," a term developed within the black community to describe black men who engage in secret sexual activity. As Gilberto Gerald notes in his article, "The 'down low' New Jargon, sensationalism, or agent of change?", "Men on the 'DL' (down low) may have sex with men but they do not relate to the established gay community, and, rather than coming out, they choose to keep their sexual activities private" (Gerald 44). Essentially, the black "down low" men whom he describes fall under Jargon's definition of homosexual activity.

In contrast to their white homosexual counterparts, black homosexuals develop a "triple" consciousness—being black, male and gay. W.E.B. Dubois developed the term double consciousness to describe the dual Black and American identity embodied in the contemporary African American. Indeed, the black homosexual has this split consciousness, added to which is his homosexual identity, which he must keep secret from his own doubly conscious community. If, as Dubois points out, the passage to selfhood is difficult for any doubly conscious black person, having to become someone else for one's own community makes the journey towards an authentic life far more difficult. Hutchinson argues that homosexuals are rejected by heterosexist blacks and barely tolerated by white homosexuals. "Black gay men thus feel alienated from the black community, from the gay community, and from the broader society" (Hutchinson 304). As previously noted, this alienation forces them to repress their identity and, consequently, to live an inauthentic life.

Further, this conflict between the two groups (the black church and homosexuals), stems from European perspectives on black men. Western stereotypes of Africa and the dominant African male have suggested that homosexuality does not exist in African societies. As Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe point out:

> For Europeans, black Africans—of all the native peoples of the world, most epitomized 'primitive man'. Since primitive man was supposed to be close to nature, ruled by instinct, and culturally unsophisticated, he had to be heterosexual, his sexual energies and outlets devoted exclusively to their 'natural' purpose: biological reproduction. If black Africans were the most primitive people in all humanity—if they were, indeed, human, which some debated—then they had to be the most heterosexual. (Murray & Roscoe xi)

Murray and Roscoe assert that historians and anthropologist have failed to include homosexual findings in their research concerning blacks in Africa in order to maintain this view, which has become embedded within the black heteronormative community.

As Angelique Harris reports, this battle between black churches and homosexuality is nothing new. All seven of the historically African American Protestant denominations still view homosexuality as an abomination and unacceptable lifestyle. The 1980s AIDS epidemic has contributed greatly to this battle. The African American community has been affected more than any other race. To make matters worse, AIDS, "originally identified as a gay disease" singled out black gay men in particular (263). Harris' article examines the relationship between the black individual and the black church, citing scholars like W.E.B. Dubois, who emphasized the important role the black church played in the advancement of black people. "Since African Americans have been denied access to public space and civic institutions, the black church served as everything from a school to a bank to a community center. More importantly, the black

church has fought . . . racial discrimination and oppression" (264). And yet through all of this, the church and its communities have yet to see how they discriminate against and oppress a specific group of people. Consequently, the justification that they provide prevents them from acknowledging their faults.

The cause of this behavior within the African American community has been debated. Harris argues that African Americans "have been trying to distance themselves from deviant forms of sexual expression for over a hundred years, and this led to the denials of homosexuality in the African American community, and extremely homophobic beliefs on the part of black churches" (265). Previous scholars have researched this topic, but as Harris acknowledges, they only devote a small chapter and/or section to the conflict between the black church and the homosexual. More recently, however, this issue has been addressed in many dissertations, mostly by those who identify with the homosexual community. Other books examine the larger issue of sexuality in the African American community, such as its relation to politics and feminism (Harris 264).

In addition, a number of articles on this topic, often from a personal perspective, emphasize the continued bias of the church against black homosexuals. In "Signifying on the Black Church," Charles I. Nero uses specific real-life examples to display the controversial issue within the black church. He explores the story of Leonard Patterson, an openly gay pastor at Ebenezer Baptist church in Atlanta (also the church where Dr. Martin Luther King preached). Patterson's white gay lover would accompany him to church, and this, according to the church, was "not playing the game" (Nero 277). As Patterson reveals, "I was told, to the effect, that as long as I played the political game and went with a person who was more easily passed off as a 'cousin', I would be able to go far in the ministry" (qtd. in Nero 277). Though this was before the

term had ever appeared, the church was implicitly advising Patterson to live his life on the "down low"—in secrecy. Nero ultimately asserts that the black church's oppression has robbed homosexuals of compassion, which has led to the loss of humanity within both the black church and black community.

Indeed, as I will show, the rigidification of both has robbed many homosexuals of their authenticity, which further diminishes the humanity of all parties. Thus, the close analysis of both *A Visitation of Spirits* and *Oranges are not the only fruit will* make clear the negative impact of the church's intransigent religious views upon the homosexual members of its community.

CHAPTER 2

'No Telephone to Hell': Horace's Battle with the Church and Community

The first novel of Randall Kenan, a gay African American southern writer, *A Visitation of Spirits* explores the troubled mind of his homosexual protagonist, Horace, who is at war with his inner demons. The title of this chapter riffs on Michelle Cliff's novel, *No Telephone to Heaven,* in which the poor people of Jamaica are represented as having called God, but having never received an answer. In Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits*, Horace's struggle with the church over his sexual identity greatly influences his decision to commit suicide. His journey towards selfhood and relationship with the spirits who visit him symbolize his call for help. The black Christian church believes that those who participate in homosexual activity will go to hell. Horace anticipates his trip to hell; however, like the poor people of Jamaica, he finds that hell refuses to answer his call. *A Visitation of Spirits* reveals the problematic relationship between homosexuality and the black community by demonstrating how the black Christian church and members of the Tim's Creek community obstruct Horace's ability to develop his authentic self. For their inability to accept his sexual orientation leads directly to his death.

When it comes to suicide, many will readily agree that it constitutes an enigmatic act that generates a wide range of feelings from empathy to rage. Whereas some are convinced that the victim of suicide is one who is suffering, others maintain that suicide is a malicious act of self-destruction. In her article "On Suicide," Georgia Noon asserts that "suicide is seen as an affront to society—an action that devalues human existence" (Noon 371). Yet I would argue that for Horace, suicide underscored the value of his human existence. Thus, for example, Eva Tettenborn states, ". . . it is not Horace who needs to change his supposedly impossible object attachments; rather, the community around him needs to accept his libidinal choices. Horace's

suicide is his ultimate act of resisting the prescriptive influences in his environment . . . [and] a way of finding a new living" (251, 262, 264). Simply put, his suicide in the novel guarantees his continued existence within our minds as an example of one who found freedom the only way he could.

Growing up in a small, rural, religious, heteronormative black community in the south, Horace was an outcast. Not only was he a homosexual, he was also a black Christian who enjoyed the company of "white folk". The effects of slavery are deeply embedded within his opinionated family, and as a result they disapprove of his white friendships. As Tettenborn puts it, "Horace is faced with the decision either to be accepted as a black man by his peers or to be perceived as sexually deviant and socially white" (251). She likewise asserts that either situation requires Horace to deny a part of his multifaceted identity. Though Tettenborn acknowledges Horace's double consciousness and its importance, I argue that, in fact, he develops a triple consciousness. Horace's status as a black man alone assures a double consciousness; consequently, as his sexuality divides him from his own race, this produces a third insistent consciousness. Thus, as Robert McRuer notes, Horace, "as a black gay teenager, always finds himself at the intersection of his contradicting triple identities": black, but not gay; openly gay, but his blackness is rendered invisible; or neither black nor gay, but socially white (McRuer 228).

The firm southern beliefs on race, sexuality and religion of Horace's family deny him the freedom to be authentic. They rely heavily on both their family's significant history in Tim's Creek and its religion-dominated traditions, which are filled with "taboos and exclusions" (Tettenborn 251). Further, Lindsay Tucker notes that their "community has attributed its survival to the rigid maintenance of patriarchal family structures, stable racial identities, and normative

sexual desires" all of which, ironically, Horace lacks (306). He grew up without his father, and according to most in the community, he was not "black" enough simply because he chose to spend most of his free time with his white friends, and most importantly, his sexual desires did not align with the norm. In search of freedom from his religious community, Horace came to view death as the only way to remain authentic.

In A Visitation of Spirits, Kenan uses both first person and omniscient narrators to recall major events in a non-linear manner, which allows the reader to understand the extent to which Horace was obstructed by the black Christian church and his community's rigid beliefs. Kenan also includes the explicit confession of Horace's first cousin, Jimmy, Horace's own personal narrative, and a detailed experienced of the Cross' journey to visit a sick family member, related from multiple point of views. Tettenborn argues that this approach foregrounds "[Horace's] inability to admit to his sexual identity in the face of an exclusive and heteronormative community. [In Kenan's novel], heterosexist black patriarchy encounters the resistance of black homosexual desire" (251). In particular, the confessions of James "Jimmy" Greene produce questions about Jimmy's *own* sexuality and authentic identity as he admits to experiencing homosexual behavior, but quickly denounces it as a "phase" in life. Kenan's narrative strategies enhance his semi-autobiographical novel's ability to address the hardships of being gay and black. Growing up gay and black himself, in a small rural town identical to Tim's Creek, Kenan had a childhood filled with turmoil similar to the experiences of Horace. As Tettenborn points out, "Kenan uses Horace's violent self-inflicted death as a critique of the lethal effects of a strictly heteronormative community on a gay member of that community" (251).

Kenan's emphasis on Horace's desire to leave his human form displays his view that suicide empowers one who suffers, no matter how tragic it may be for those around one. For

Horace, planning his suicide ultimately meant "transforming himself," changing his current self to become who he really is. We first meet Horace when he has begun to plan what I argue constitutes his "rebirth". Having already experienced isolation, repudiation, and condemnation, Horace determined that fusing his two identities had proven to be impossible. This led him to negate his religious identity and fully commit to his sexual identity, even if committing meant losing his physical presence. Horace's decision to transform into a bird symbolizes the freedom he desired. As his thoughts wandered, "He knew how he could spend the rest of his appointed time on this earth. Not as a tortured human, but as a bird free to swoop and dive, dip and swerve . . . no longer will he be bound by human laws and human rules . . .there were no moral laws that say you must remain human. And he would not" (Kenan 12).

Death for Horace functions both as an escape from oppression and his way to be authentic. As a human, Horace felt powerless and, as he mentioned, tortured, as a result of how much his own sense of self differed from the stable identity of his community and church. Kenan's use of the word "remain" in the quote above implies that Horace feels his presence will always "remain," in the sense of being present, just simply not in the physical (human) form. Horace believed that he had no alternative, that suicide was his only way out (Kenan 16). Again, I argue here that Horace seeks a "way out," an exit from both the church and his community. As a sixteen-year-old gay African American forced to live within specific boundaries, he found life extremely difficult. The morning before his death, he expressed a nonchalant attitude toward everything. His responses varied from, "what did it matter, in a few days it would be over" to, "but it was no matter; soon it would be all over" (Kenan 12, 15). Here Horace clearly refers to his coming transformation (suicide).

The novel thus acknowledges the irony of the black Christian church's beliefs. Its radical condemnation of homosexuality ultimately influences the one isolated (the homosexual) to commit multiple sins. Horace was torn between the theological views of his church and community and his own personal feelings. As he thought about his planned transforming/suicide to obtain freedom, he questioned if the sin of murder was equivalent to the sin of loving another man. Horace then determined that whether he killed himself or not, he would remain living in sin. Trying to avoid all sins, the bookish, art-oriented Horace aimed to pass for heterosexual by becoming associated with jocks and engaging in premarital sex with his short-lived girlfriend. Ironically, as Tettenborn underscores, this premarital sexual relationship seems less of a sin to Horace than the mere thought of being able to love another man" (260).

In the novel, the vivid presence of demons shows Horace's hatred within himself while allowing him to return to the past to view his painful conflict with his black homosexual identity and the Christian church. Horace's torn psyche conjures these demons, a projection of the "darkness" his church perceives as homosexual identity. Indeed, the demon's voice represents "[Horace's] pain, anguish and sorrow itself . . . [his] lust and hate . . . [and his] ignorance and childish bliss" (Kenan 27). Essentially, the demon represents Horace himself. In search of answers and protection, Horace fails to find anyone who can protect him from himself, the church, or the community. For the church's beliefs force Horace to believe that he himself is the source of taint: "For it was just as preachers had been preaching it all the years of his life, warning: there are wretched, wicked spirits that possess . . . and force [one] to commit unnatural acts. It [became] clear to him now" (Kenan 28). Horace understood that the demon was a part of him in a way and decided to permit the demon to guide him, "for he knew the voice would take care of him and teach him and save him" (Kenan 28). As Tettenborn acknowledges, "The cruel

and commanding voice of the demon ironically gives Horace the clarity he never received from his environment" (256). Indeed, the demon leads Horace to give up his false heterosexual identity.

To emphasize the battle between Horace's sexuality and the church, *A Visitation of Spirits* admits the reader into a church sermon specifically addressing homosexuality. As both the demon and Horace watched, Horace remembered the events of the day. The Reverend who preceded Horace's Cousin Jimmy, Reverend Barden, began the sermon by emphasizing that one should not be led astray. Here the Reverend was referring to homosexuals who strayed away from what Tim Creek's strict religious community believed to be the norm. The congregation's chuckles and supporting gestures let the Reverend know that they fully agreed with his theologies. Before reciting a verse in the Bible that condemned homosexuality, Reverend Barden announced, "Now I'm going to step on some toes this morning, but that what my job is now, ain't it?" (Kenan 77). In the representation of this preacher and his sermon, and the way in which the community endorsed it, the novel criticizes the black Christian church and the way it condemns homosexuals. Clearly the Reverend believes that he holds all the right answers and that it his human duty to "fix" those who do not fit within his boundaries.

Another example of this critique occurs when Reverend Barden tells the following story to the church:

> 'I saw something on the TV that upset me right much. This host fellow was talking to about six people . . . (they were all white, you know) . . . their topic was Live-in Lovers'. The expression on his face read, Can you believe it? 'And you know they won't talking about men and women living and loving together as our lord prescripted it here' He pointed a firm finger at the bible. 'Not in holy matrimony, of course not. They were

> talking about men and men, women and women---help me, Jesus. Living together in sin. Like it won't nothing . . . my children could have been up watching this filth as if it were natural . . . it ain't. It just ain't, you heard what the book said.' (Kenan 78)

Not only did the Reverend shun homosexuals; he ranted on thereafter about how "unclean" same-sex sexual relations are. He suggested that this behavior should not apply to black people, especially not black Christians. Indeed, he informed the members of his all-black church that the guests on what he considered to be a degrading talk show were all white. Everyone in the church, including Horace's family members, encouraged the Reverend and his beliefs. Horace acknowledged that Old Miss Christopher even shouted, "Step Rev. Go on and step" (Kenan 79). Further, the Reverend's action of pointing his firm finger at the Bible reinforces the black Christian church's strict adherence to a literal reading of the scriptures. His shouting, "You heard what the book says" makes that connection clear, since the "book" in question is the Holy Bible (Kenan 78). Not surprisingly, the demon instructed Horace to kill the Reverend as he continues to boast about the uncleanliness of homosexuals. Although Horace responds that he couldn't, this shows Horace's true feelings toward Reverend Barden and his message, since Horace has projected the demon. But Horace disappoints the demon with his refusal to stand up to the Reverend, even after death, and the two fall into conflict, thus embodying Horace's internal struggle.

Clearly the beliefs of the church and their community had a negative effect on Horace and the development of his identity. While still in the church, the demon reminds Horace of the negative opinions of him held by the members of the church. This further emphasizes the church's obstruction of Horace simply because of his sexual orientation. And though Horace was unable to see faces clearly, he heard the many voices: "Wicked. Abomination. Man Lover. Child

Molester. Sissy Boy. Unclean Bastard. Cocksucker. Oreo. Homo-suck-sual! Ashamed. Be Ashamed! Faggot!" (Kenan 87). Every name symbolizes the church's perceptions of homosexuals, associating them negatively with child molesters and effeminate ways. This showed Horace that he did not fit into the town or the church's heteronormative code. The demon (Horace himself) continued to convince Horace that transforming was his only way out: "Don't you see now? It's better this way. Better. It had to be this way. There was no other way. You belong" (Kenan 87). By ostracizing him because of his sexuality, the church and members of its community forced Horace to believe that as a homosexual, he did not belong within it.

Kenan's novel foregrounds Tim's Creek as a community that desires to accept no one outside of what they considered the norm and thus perpetuates oppression within their own community. Two members of the Cross family, Lester and Jethro, are considered "the black sheep," having failed to live up to their family's standards. Their treatment within the novel reinforces that view of the community and underscores that Horace isn't alone in his marginalization. Horace's aunt Rachel also remained outside of the family center. Since the Cross family was very dependent on family legacy, she was expected to get married and bear children. She was the only sister who was not married, which thus consistently singled her out.

Like Rachel, Horace's uncle Lester did not fulfill his expected family role. As with the other men in the Cross family, Lester was expected to become a pastor. However, he had no interest in becoming a pastor or following the strict rules of the Bible. He settled for work in the field, never attended church and drank regularly. Lester was Horace's great-uncle, who inherited the smallest piece of land. His family knew he could not and more importantly, would not continue the family's legacy; thus a large amount of land was unnecessary. Lester's disassociation with the church caused Horace's great aunt Jonnie Mae to marry Malachi Greene.

His family was equally into the church and owned an exceptional amount of land. For Horace's great aunt, this was the only way to keep her grandfather's dream.

The death of Horace's uncle Jethro opened up the possibility of many family secrets. Jethro failed to support his family and was an alcoholic. Many suggested that alcoholism, a problem embedded within the Cross family, caused Jethro's death; however, many members within the family developed their own reasons. Horace's uncles Jethro and Lester are, as Maisha Wester notes, "eventually stifled and suppressed by the family and slowly disinherited from their property" (Wester 1043). Rachel, on the other hand, was continuously outcast: "Rachel seemed disinterested in men, and though her mother nudged and pushed and argued and coerced her to find a husband, she never did" (Kenan 118). Wester argues that Rachel's disinterest in men implies that she is a closeted lesbian. Similarly, Horace's aunt Ruth displaces the blame for her husband Jethro's drinking from her to the Cross family, suggesting that it stemmed from the Cross family's deep rooted "evil". Simply put, Ruth declares that the evil was embedded within Lester, Jimmy *and* Horace (Kenan, 197). Associating the others with Horace, after his death, categorizes the named men as homosexuals too. Instead of acknowledging their different sexual orientation, the Cross family chooses to blame drinking and promiscuous behavior on Lester and Jethro's differences from the community norm, while willfully ignoring any issues surrounding Horace and Jimmy.

Indeed, Jimmy's confessions in *A Visitation of Spirits* demonstrate how Horace was not the only one affected by the church and the community's beliefs even as they reveal his own underlying melancholy, which mirrors that of Horace. Comparing himself to Horace, Jimmy states, "He, just like me, had been created by this society" (188). Jimmy continues to question himself, wondering if there was anything he could have done to save Horace. He failed to realize

that he had added to Horace's grief by proclaiming homosexuality an unnatural act, which implied that Horace was unnatural too. Horace confided in Jimmy, who admits to going through a period where he too experimented with men for reassurance, but was left with no support:

> Jimmy *(smiling, putting his hands on Horace's shoulder)*: Horace, we've all done a little . . . you know . . . experimenting. It's a part of growing up. It's . . . . Well, it's kind of important to--
>
> Horace: But it's not experimenting. I like men. I don't like women. There's something wrong with me.
>
> Jimmy: Horace, really I have reason to believe it's just a phase. I went through a period where I . . . you know, experimented.
>
> Horace: Did you enjoy it?
>
> Jimmy (*slightly stunned):* En . . . Enjoy it? Well . . . I . . . you . . . know. Well the physical was . . . I guess pleasant. I really don't remember.
>
> Horace: Did you ever fall in love with a man?
>
> Jimmy: Fall in love? No. (*Laughs.*) Oh, Horace. Don't be so somber. I really think this is something that will pass. I've known you all your life. You are perfectly normal. (Kenan 113)

Jimmy's denial of *his* personal authenticity, as Tettenborn has suggested, "Helps illuminate identity formation in Tim's Creek" (251). He cannot fully explain his past encounters with men without interruptions, and he laughs off the possibility of falling in love with another man. But ironically, he doesn't laugh off enjoying the sexual pleasures of another man. Jimmy's emphasis on labeling Horace's homoerotic feelings as "something that will *pass*" implies that, to his understanding, his homoerotic feelings *have* passed. Thus, so should those Horace experiences.

Moreover, according to Jimmy, "It is a part of growing up" (113). Kenan never specifically identified the sexual orientation of Jimmy, but his loveless marriage and the physical pleasure he received from men strongly suggest that his feelings for men were in fact identical to Horace's and like Horace's, could not be changed. This, in turn, establishes that Jimmy's internal suffering mirrors that of Horace. However, he chose to suppress his emotions and pass as a heterosexual preacher to avoid being an outcast. Rather than help Horace understand his feelings, Jimmy only reassures Horace that he is "perfectly normal," which both clashes with what Horace knows of himself and ultimately underscores the idea that being a homosexual is not normal. Jimmy supports his beliefs by referring to the Bible, "you know as well as I know what the Bible says . . . Ask God to give you strength and in no time you'll change" (Kenan 113,114). Once again, the Bible symbolizes the strict heteronormative beliefs of the church and its members—Horace's community, and Jimmy, whatever his internal predilections, must adhere to those strictly or be himself outcast.

Jimmy's nonchalant, unsupportive interaction with Horace influenced Horace's decision to negate his religious commitment. The night of Horace's death, Horace approached Jimmy, continuously referring to him as "preacher boy". Horace's choice to associate Jimmy with the church proved that he himself is no longer committed to the church, unlike Jimmy, who has experimented with men, but has suppressed his feelings. During this heated exchange with Jimmy, Kenan describes Horace's final hours as "free": "so happy, as he cradled the gun in his hand like a cool phallus, happy for the first time in so, many months . . . and he smiled. . . [this was] the way to final peace, and as he marched along aware of the gun he held in his hand, glad to be free" (Kenan 28). Tettenborn argues that the equation of his sexuality with a gun signifies the danger he sees contained with his sexual identity. But I would read this comparison of the

gun to a male's genital as signifying Horace's joyful embrace of his identity as homosexual, the gun his tool for happiness. Moreover, Horace's pointing the gun at Jimmy, the "preacher boy", embodies his retaliation against both the church and the members of its community *and* his family even as it underscores Jimmy's own failure to embrace his inner self.

A Visitation of Spirits also addresses the contentious issues of race and sexuality within the black community. In addition to dealing with his sexuality, Horace was forced to defend his identity as a black man or "black enough" to his family and community. The Cross family viewed race from the same skewed perspective as that from which they viewed homosexuality. From a young age his aunts had taught him "how to deal" with white people, as if that were different from "dealing" with black people. As Horace matured, he saw that his family's perception of white people was as distorted as their perception of love and homosexuality. . Thus, as Wester declares:

> Horace's aunts particularly exemplify the consequent of colorism that results from their historical condition as oppressed minorities as well as how such racial essentialism helps define masculinity and patriarchal position. . . [For the Cross'], blacks can only trust and befriend blacks and all whites are to be mistrusted and challenged. . . The family justifies their essentialism by summoning up the racist tribulations they have suffered in the past. (Wester 1041)

As a teenager, Horace was reprimanded for hanging out with his white friends. As he attempted to justify his friendship, his aunts enforced their uncompromising beliefs and were offended by Horace's persistent defense of his white friends. Horace responded, "They're different," meaning that they (his white friends) are not like the racist whites that his aunts despised. But his aunt Rachel (the unmarried undercover lesbian) responded, "They're white, ain't they . . . you

black, ain't you?," ultimately implying that the two races could never be integrated, just as for them, there was no way to integrate two sexes, *or* integrate homosexuals within their religion (Kenan 186). It is ironic here, that his out casted aunt Rachel outcasts whites.

Consequently, just as Horace severed his religious commitment, he renounced his black identity. "He ignored the criticisms of his friends, the labels that were being placed on him. Oreo. Greyboy. . . [And] he refused to notice how other blacks stopped talking to him" (Kenan, 238). Unable to please everyone, Horace always had to repress one of his identities, which then made him inauthentic. His black identity failed to live up to the standards of the members of his community and his family. Moreover, the stereotypical names he was called categorized him as black on the outside, but white on the inside, which was obviously not good enough.

The disapproval of others contributed to Horace's inability to integrate his parts. After his death, Jimmy reflected on that and admitted that Horace was the creation of a society, the son of the community: "He, just like me, had been created by this society. He was a son of the community, more than most" (188). However, he pointed out that Horace had a flaw that the community would never accept--his sexual orientation. And more importantly, he stated that "[Horace] didn't quite know who he was" (Kenan 188). Horace's brief relationship with his first boyfriend Gideon exemplifies this. Though Horace enjoyed Gideon's company and the intimacy they shared, he did everything within his power to fight those feelings. "He wouldn't call it love but it had been intense and real" (Kenan 143). His relationship with Gideon both frightened and excited him, illustrating the conflicted feelings of his battling identities. The pressure of society caused Horace to repress his homosexual identity that wished to be with Gideon. Instead, Horace condemned Gideon for the same thing that the church and community were condemning him for—being a homosexual. Horace mentally and physically abused Gideon while at the same

time fantasizing about interacting with him sexually. The abuse he gave and resentment he held toward Gideon mirrors the abuse he gave and resentment he had toward himself for not being what his community and church considered normal.

Although Horace admitted to himself his feelings for men, he detested labels associating him with homosexuality. This denial further underscores his inability to fully claim his essential identity. The fight between him and Gideon caused Gideon to expose Horace: "Remember, black boy, you heard it here first: You're a faggot, Horace. You Know? You're a faggot. You can run, you can hide, but when shit comes down . . . you suck cock, you don't eat pussy" (Kenan 164). Horace responded, "You're sickening," which reveals how he feels felt about himself and, further, how he refused to accept the label "faggot". But Gideon's response, "I'm sickening. At least I know what I am," shows Gideon's acceptance of himself and underscores Horace's inauthentic identity. Unlike Horace, Gideon is comfortable with his sexuality and denies others the permission to define who he is.

Horace's issue with the label "faggot" appears again as his lover Antonio exposes him exactly as Gideon had:

> "Look out world. Superfag is on the move'
>
> Horace turned, trying to be stern. "Don't call me that"
>
> "What?"
>
> "You know"
>
> "Faggot? . . . What's the matter? Don't like being called what you are?
>
> "What I am is brilliant." (Kenan 224-225)

It is evident here that Horace is so uncomfortable with the term *and* his identity that he cannot even repeat the word. And though the encounter with Antonio came a few years after his encounter with Gideon, Horace still harbors feelings of confusion, denial, resentment and anger.

The narrator's description of Horace's final battle with himself fully reveals the effects the church and the members of the community had on him. As Horace engaged in a conversation with his homosexual self, whom he identified as the demon, his feelings were torn between continuing his life and following the demon to "life beneath the ground". Enraged at himself, Horace pulls the gun, shooting his reflection. "There on the ground lay, himself, a gory red gash through his chest. His face caught in a grimace, moaning and speaking incoherently. Why? You didn't have to. You shouldn't have to. Horace looked at his hands covered in blood, and Horace looked up at Horace, his eyes full of horror . . . as if to say: you meant it, didn't you? You actually hate me?" (Kenan 235). As Tettenborn reads this scene, "Horace cannot reconcile the two potent images of himself, one passing for a straight man, frantic and armed with a gun to protect his fake identity, one representing a vulnerable naked black gay figure, extending his arm to offer peace and personal fulfillment" (262). Horace has not found a way to integrate his two identities while remaining in the presence of his judgmental community. This scene, moreover, cogently emphasizes the conflict between the homosexual and the black community in general. Horace's response to *Horace*, "Why? You didn't have to. You shouldn't have to" openly criticizes the black community, which includes the black church. Horace's response implies that as a homosexual, he *should not* have had to kill himself in order to gain an authentic identity or acceptance from his church and community. But unfortunately, in this case, for a rigid community like Tim's Creek, he did.

Though the community and the church affected Horace to the point where he sought a way "out," Horace's death had no effect on them as they continued to live in their heteronormative ways. As the narrator revealed, "The day did not halt in its tracks: clocks did not stop" (Kenan 254). Yet his suicide served as his only way free from chaos, at last providing him a chance to live, if only for an instant, without secrecy, shame or guilt. Thus, finally, *A Visitation of Spirits* revealed the many flaws within the black Christian church and many towns identical to Tim's Creek. In the end, Horace won the battle; for that moment Horace lives as his full self; afterwards, Jimmy is forced to ponder Horace' fate. But, as the end points out, perhaps, with a preacher more sensitive to difference, one might see the possibility of change. Kenan's novel makes readers in general and the black community in particular aware of the burden they place on a specific group of people. In addition, it begs the question, "How can one find a way to integrate one's homosexual identity with one's religious identity?" Returning to the title of the chapter, after a long battle and multiple "calls to heaven," Horace won his freedom: His call was answered.

CHAPTER 3

Choosing Sides: Jeanette's Battle with the Church and her Mother

Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* explores sexuality, invisibility and identity. Like Kenan's text, Winterson's powerfully presents the struggle between homosexuals and the church. The semi-autobiographical novel depicts the journey of Winterson's protagonist, who is also named Jeanette, as she comes to terms with her sexuality within the oppressive barriers of the Pentecostal Christian church and the beliefs of her evangelist mother. Blending myths, fairytales and Biblical references, Winterson further illustrates the effects that rigid beliefs of the church had on her protagonist. Through this novel, according to Reina Vanderwiel, she "exposes socially delicate issues like the deception of the inviolability of family life and the insularity of the church" (144). Both her mother and the church object to her sexual orientation based on their rigid theological views, and this hinders Janette from discovering her identity.

As suggested by the title, oranges play an important role throughout the text, serving as Winterson's principal motif. Jeanette's mother repeatedly insists that oranges *are* the only fruit, and within the text, that fruit provides Jeanette comfort during troubled times. But even as this represents the limited views of both Jeanette's mother and the church, it also implies to the reader that more kinds of fruits exist than oranges, just as there are many dynamics of love beyond that shared by a man and a woman. Yet her mother's strong beliefs and her own desire to please the church deeply affect Jeanette's identity formation, as they ultimately force her to choose between the love she has for women and the love she has for God.

At a young age Jeanette acknowledges her mother's differences but does not understand her extreme teachings and beliefs. She admits that often her mother invents her own theologies and describes her mother a fighter, more specifically, a wrestler willing to fight anything, whose

dominant personality and rigid vision prevented her from seeing ambiguity. To her, everything was black or white, good or evil. Through her mother, Jeanette understood that evil was "the devil (in his many forms), next door, sex (in its many forms) and slugs" (3). "Next door" was what Jeanette's mother called their neighbors. Since they did not attend church, her mother regarded them as unholy, as heathens. In addition, they indulged in activities which her mother condemned, such as having children out of wedlock and drinking alcohol. One day Jeanette, her mother and Mrs. White heard "strange noises, like cries for help, coming from next door" (53). They were having sex and Jeanette's mother rushed insanely to cover her ears: "Let go of my ears, I can hear it too" (54). Though Jeanette knew something was wrong, she did not understand exactly what was going on or why her mother and Mrs. White were appalled that it happened on a Sunday: "I didn't know quite what fornicating was, but I had read about it in Deuteronomy, and knew it was a sin. But why was it so noisy?" (54). Thereafter, when they heard the sounds, her mother forced her and Mrs. White to join her in the loud singing of *Ask the Saviour to Help You*. Her mother's horror at the neighbors' having sex on Sunday revealed her strict religious views; Sunday was supposed to be a day of worship. Her mother's actions demonstrated to Jeanette her desire to force her religious beliefs on everyone.

An invitation to the seaside further illustrated to Jeanette her mother's religious obsession. Jeanette got the chance to go to the seaside with two women who ran the paper shop where Jeanette purchased her comics. Jeanette excitedly asked her mother's permission. She enjoyed the company of these women. But to her surprise, her mother insisted she not go: "When my mother said firmly and forever, no. . .I couldn't understand why not, and she wouldn't explain. She didn't even let me go back to say I couldn't . . . she said they dealt in unnatural passions. I thought she meant they put chemicals in their sweets" (Winterson 7).

"Unnatural passions" for her mother meant that the women were involved in a non-heterosexual relationship, which, given her religious orientation, made it "unnatural". Though she did not know yet, Jeanette admired their non-heterosexual relationship. A gypsy had once warned Jeanette, then seven, that she would never get married. This did not bother her since she saw how the two unmarried women who ran the paper shop were perfectly normal—to her—and happy. As Jeanette matured, she gradually came to understand this further.

Winterson's novel provided few positive images of marriage in general and men in particular. Jeanette's father, who never said a word, was often described as "her mother's husband"; he remained invisible and subject to her mother's overbearing personality. Though her mother described her father as a good man, she often reprimanded him and consistently prayed for him. Jeanette understood that for her mother, "he was never quite good enough" (Winterson 11). More specifically, Jeanette had nightmares about marrying a pig and, coincidentally, she met a woman who told her that *she* had married a pig. Jeanette took the meaning of the woman's words literally and questioned why she had married a pig. The woman's response, "you never know 'till it's too late," did not provide Jeanette any further clarification; it only made her more wary of marriage (71). Her association of men with pigs and beasts, as Sonia Front points out, influenced her conclusion that marriage may not be a negative thing (40).

Unlike other kids her age, Jeanette began school late, which meant that she lacked the social skills of her peers. Thus, her only friend was Elsie, a rather unconventional adult. Her mother did not wish for Jeanette to attend school with other children; she insisted it was a "breeding ground" (16). Naïve and young, Jeanette admitted that at that time she did not understand what her mother meant: "I didn't know what it meant, but I knew it was a bad thing,

like “unnatural passions. . . ‘They will lead you astray,’ was the only answer I got” (16). Yet, ironically, only Jeanette’s mother was leading her astray.

In school she quickly became an outcast to both students and teachers. The teachers and parents complained that her thoughts and ideas were giving the students nightmares. Jeanette had told them about the horrors of demons and the fate of those who sinned. Intently relating one of her stories, Jeanette nearly strangled one of her classmates, though she had not intended to harm her. Jeanette turned all her assignments into readings about biblical themes, which usually offended the other students. One day the teacher responded to Jeanette, “You do seem often pre-occupied, shall we say, with God” (41). Her “pre-occupations” were caused by the extreme teachings and beliefs her mother had instilled in her. When the teacher contacted her mother and requested for her “religious leanings to be moderated,” Jeanette’s mother responded by taking her out to the cinema as a treat, which only encouraged such behavior (43). She was proud of her daughter.

But throughout Jeanette’s childhood, this extreme religious orientation negatively affected her. Thus, for example, again at the age of seven, Jeanette went deaf for three months. Rather than taking responsibility for her child’s sickness and trying to cure her medically, her mother allowed her strict beliefs in the church to overpower reality. She saw Jeanette as “full of spirit,” her irregular behavior an act of God (Winterson 26). Previously, a guest pastor at the church, considered an expert in demons, claimed that Jeanette was in fact cursed by the number of her age, seven. First reminding everyone of the many blessings associated with the number seven, “the seven days of creation, the seven-branched candle stick, seven seals,” he then asserted: “The demon can return SEVENFOLD” (12-13). His speech, which made the congregation uneasy, suggested further that one who is considered good can easily become

influenced by the devil. This encounter influenced Jeanette's mother to believe that the lord was working in mysterious ways. Her response to people who inquired about Jeanette's unresponsiveness was, "Oh, it's not surprising, she's seven you know! . . . It's a holy number, strange things happen in sevens" (23). The entire church supported Jeanette's mother.

When the regular pastor preached a sermon about how "full of spirit" Jeanette was she finally began to recognize flaws within the church beliefs: "Since I was born I had assumed that the world ran on very simple lines, like a larger version of our church, now I was finding that even the church was sometimes confused" (27). Unable to get her mother's attention, Jeanette was determined to find out what was wrong for herself. She ran into a member of her church, Miss Jewsbury, who happened to miss the sermon about her and whom Mrs. White had once described as unholy. Fortunately, Miss Jewsbury discovered what was wrong with Jeanette and rushed her to the hospital, where she remained until she underwent surgery to repair her hearing. Her mother's response to her diagnosis was "why didn't you tell me?" (26). She had failed to grasp that her commitment to the beliefs of the church was obstructing her ability to see things for what they really were.

Soon thereafter, Jeanette began to see discrepancies between her own beliefs and those of the church: "The sermon was on perfection, and it was at this moment that I began to develop my first theological disagreement" (60). The pastor stated that perfection was flawlessness and something one should aspire to. He then declared, "It was the condition of the Godhead; it was the condition of the man before the fall. It could only be truly realized in the next world, but we had a sense of it . . . which was both a blessing and a curse" (60). Yet Jeanette found this to be untrue, and as she matured, she continued to find the church teachings problematic. It became

increasingly clear to her that the church's "perfect" theological views, which were perceived to lead its Christian followers to a "perfect" life, contained many flaws.

At fourteen, Jeanette revealed her homosexual desires to her mother—who informed the church. Public humiliation was then brought upon both Jeanette and her teenage lover, Melanie. It was not surprising that Jeanette's mother informed the church, since her life was essentially ruled by both the pastor and the church. But the episode made Jeanette conclude, "If there was a such thing as spiritual adultery, [her] mother was a spiritual whore" (Winterson 132). Thus, Jeanette's "abnormal behavior" became community knowledge. As Winterson relates it, "The pastor stated: "These children of God . . . have fallen under Satan's spell . . . these children of God have fallen foul of their lusts . . . these children are full of demons . . . how are the best become the worst" (104). In front of the entire church, the pastor condemned the two for being in love, "Do you deny you love this woman with a love reserved for man and wife?" (105). While Melanie crumbled under the pressure of society and the church, Jeanette expressed her love for both God and Melanie.

The only person who supported Jeanette's sexual orientation was Miss Jewsbury, through whom Winterson displays further issues within the church's community. Miss Jewsbury helps Jeanette meet with Melanie, but she also seduces her, exposing her secret identity as a lesbian, hidden from the church. Within the novel, Miss Jewsbury represents an individual who has also been obstructed by the church's theological beliefs, forced to keep herself a secret, and, thus rebels in her own way. Not only does she engage in homosexual relations with a minor, she offers her alcohol to suppress Jeanette's pain from the public condemnation. Ironically, the root of her last name, Jew, implies a certain marginalization, as the evangelical Christian community historically considered Jews unholy. In addition, Miss Jewsbury resembles Jimmy, in Kenan's *A*

Visitation of spirits. Both characters hid their authentic identities from members of the church and community.

Through the sermon scene, Winterson clearly illustrates the degree to which the church and its community members deny Jeanette her right to be what she is, or to become her "authentic" self. The use of the phrase "love reserved for man and wife" demonstrates their restricted beliefs and morals. As a result, they cannot accept her as she is—a young Pentecostal Christian and a lesbian. It is ironic that directly before the sermon begins, Jeanette revealed how happy she was to be in the presence of God with the person she loved. She believed that Melanie was a "gift from the lord, and it would be ungrateful [of her] not to appreciate her" (104). Though she assumed that the church would not agree with her decision, it did not occur to Jeanette that loving someone of the same sex would cause complications both for her relationship with her mother and her place within the church.

The relationship between Jeanette and her mother continued to deteriorate as she grew older and her mother became an ever greater obstruction to her full development: "What my mother didn't know was that I now knew she had rewritten the ending. *Jane Eyre* was my favorite non-Bible book . . . it was like the day I discovered my adoption papers while searching for a pack of playing cards. I have never since played with playing cards, and I have never since read *Jane Eyre*" (75). Her mother's version of Bronte's novel ended with Jane's agreeing to a loveless marriage to St. John, and the two becoming missionaries in India. As Helen Grice argues, "This of course fits within her mother's attitude to sex, her fundamentalism, and her proposed destiny for Jeanette as a missionary" (24). In reality (which her mother does not live in), Jane turns down St. John's offer of marriage and instead returns to marry the now-single and

blind Rochester. Both the novel and the playing cards remind Jeanette of the lies that she heard all her life and, as result, she wants no association with the two.

Her mother's deceit went far beyond changing the ending of a book or hiding her adoption papers. Her birth mother had "come back to claim her" but the ending was far from happy (100). Jeanette's mother did not allow her to meet her birth mother. During the visit, the two women exchanged what Jeanette described as angry voices, and after five minutes the woman left. Jeanette was furious and confronted her mother, who in return slapped her and replied, "I'm your mother, *she* was a carrying case . . . *she's* gone and *she'll* never come back" (Italics added 101).

The unexpected news of being adopted contributed to Jeanette's struggle for identity and authenticity. Although the two never discussed the incident again, this caused a further rupture in her relationship with the woman whom she had known all her life as her mother. Whatever identity she thought she had possessed was now taken away and as she learned, the identity she was beginning to shape for herself was rejected by her community *and* her "mother," who soon asserted with aggressiveness and anger, "[Jeanette's] no daughter of mine" (Winterson 153). Consequently, as Jeanette claimed her lesbian identity, her mother chose finally to reject her, despite her earlier persistence in asserting her possessive sense of motherhood. As Front points out, "Jeanette's sexual orientation is thus enough to cancel the ties the two women were bound with and to marginalize her" (Front 43).

With the hope of repairing their relationship and "gaining" her heterosexual daughter "back", Jeanette's mother burned all of her possessions that related to Melanie which, for her mother, represented her identity as a lesbian. But her mother only ended up pushing Jeanette further away. According to Jeanette, "[her mother] burnt a lot more than the letters that night in

the backyard. . . in her head she was still queen, but not my queen anymore" (112). Jeanette now resented her mother more than ever, for she had once again removed a part of Jeanette's identity—the belongings that represented her love for Melanie. This further hindered the development of her authenticity. Jeanette's tumultuous relationship with her mother would soon affect her future relationships with women. She was cautious not to fall victim to betrayal ever again. For Jeanette, betrayal meant that one promised to be on your side but switched to someone else's side. Winterson presents all of Jeanette's relationships with women as negative experiences: her birth mother abandoned her, her biological mother betrayed *and* abandoned her, Melanie betrayed *and* abandoned her, and most importantly, her only friend Elsie abandoned her when she died. To make matters worse, Jeanette was not permitted to attend Elsie's funeral because of her "unnatural passions" and unholiness (though she found a way to show up anyway).

Jeanette's relationship with Melanie signified her attempt to understand who she was as her confusion with her sexual orientation and the confusion of the church led to a greater confusion within her. Their relationship began as an innocent friendship that soon became intimate. In the beginning, no one suspected anything even though the two spent a lot of time together. Her family and others saw their relationship as platonic, and they shared their love for one another in secrecy: ". . . We had to be more careful. She stayed at my house once, and my mother very carefully made up the camp bed in my room. 'We don't need it," I told her. 'Yes you do,' she told me . . . we heard her come slowly up the stairs to bed . . . I had learned to move quickly" (102). It was unacceptable for two young teenagers to sleep in the same bed. Both Jeanette and Melanie knew that if their secret were exposed, catastrophe would result. But this did not deter them from expressing emotions and feelings towards one another: "We were quiet,

and I traced the outline of her marvelous bones and the triangle of the muscle in her stomach . . . 'I love [her] almost as much as I love the lord,'" (103-04). This moment constituted the first time that Jeanette acknowledged her commitment to both her religion and her sexuality despite the beliefs of the church and her mother.

The church was convinced that Jeanette could be "fixed". However, the specific cure was unknown and in the meantime, the pastor suggested starvation and confinement: "Don't let her out of this room, and don't feed her. She needs to lose strength before it can be hers again" (107). The pastor's decision to resort to what could be argued as child abuse illustrates the hypocrisy embedded within the church. In addition, the church community labeled her as demonic, possessed and evil---the beliefs of many Christians regarding homosexuality. Like Horace, Jeanette confided in her demonic alter ego. The demon showed her that her difference did not make her unholy or demonic and that ultimately it was up to Jeanette to choose the right path for her life, while accepting the satisfaction to be derived from whatever choice she made. After this, Jeanette decided to repent and was exorcized. As Raymond-Jean Frontain argues, "The physical deprivation and psychological brutality of the exorcism force[d] Jeanette to choose between a known community and a self that she is only just coming to know" (Frontain 220). She temporarily conformed to the beliefs of the society and the church, which led them to believe that she was "fixed". As the members of the church prayed, Jeanette acted, pretending to have learned from her mistakes while reassuring her demonic alter ego that this was her only option. The pretending forced Jeanette to live an inauthentic life in order to please everyone else, and more importantly, to be able to eat again. Two days had passed since she had had a meal. However, though she played the role for quite some time (almost a year); she at last realized that she was not satisfied with living a lie once she met Katy.

Meeting Katy made Jeanette realize how unauthentic her life was. With Katy she was able to resurface the feelings of happiness and passion that she had once shared with Melanie. All she wanted was acceptance and the ability to love freely. Her interest in women had not change or minimized---it had only been repressed. Unlike Horace, Jeanette found the courage to stand up to the beliefs of the church, asserting her true identity and her ability to love both women *and* worship God.

Balancing the two soon proved to be a lot of pressure for Jeanette: "I had to head the Bible study that night, despite my sudden nervousness and the worry that I was getting ill again" (122). To be ill refers to being herself—a lesbian. She led Bible study classes in church and was one of the first women to hold a powerful position. In order to keep her position, she could not reveal her sexual identity. Ultimately the life she was living mirrored the life of African American gay males who were on the "down low," forced to live their homosexual lives in secrecy too. Further, Front points out that "the church provides women an opportunity to be recognized and valued outside of the private sphere and although they act independently of the men within the society, they act in service of the patriarchal ideology and are subordinate to male figures of authority, such as God and the pastor" (41). But the church and her mother soon related Jeanette's success in church to her deviant sexuality. For they believed that she was trying to fulfill what was deemed as a man's role. Front acknowledges that once Jeanette's unnatural passions were revealed, she was accused of "usurping the power". This exposes a contradiction within her mother's beliefs, since her mother wished for her to engage in missionary work---this was, for her mother, Jeanette's sole purpose in life. However, Front argues that Jeanette's mother believed women ought to limit their ministry to each other, their children and pagans. Here she echoed the beliefs of her pastor, neither of whom recognized their

inconsistencies Or as Front notes, “Being his puppet, she support[ed] the male dominion of the church, asserting that the message belonged to the men” (41).

Jeanette’s new relationship with Katy illustrated a major development in her growth. Katy differed from Melanie because she was not easily persuaded by the thoughts of the majority. Yet, as with Melanie, the two were still forced to love in secrecy:

> We weren’t cold, not that night nor any of the others we spent together over the years that followed. She was my most uncomplicated love affair, and I loved her because of it . . . she seemed to have no worries at all . . . I had no intentions of telling anyone else what happened between Katy and me. Not by nature discreet or guilt, I had enough memory to know where that particular revelation would lead. (123-34)

This displays how the church’s beliefs, morals and values keep Jeanette from being “free”. She is aware, as she reminds herself of her memories, that it is best to keep her new relationship a secret. If not, the past filled with humiliation and disgrace would repeat itself. However, their love was exposed. For they could not hide their feelings from each other; their love was written over their faces. Determined to protect Katy from the trauma she went through, Jeanette lied:

> ‘I told her that my affair with Melanie had never really ended. That Melanie had written me for months and that finally torn with love myself, I had begged Katy to help me arrange a meeting.’ She believed me. She wanted to . . . and I knew she wanted to upset my mother as much as possible. . . Katy was safe that was the important thing . . . unlike me she couldn’t cope with the darker side of our church. . . I was determined that they shouldn’t start that demon stuff on her. . .I didn’t know what to expect . . . but I knew I wouldn’t live through any of that again. (130)

Lying for Jeanette wasn't hard; after all she had been told so many lies throughout her life that everything to her was a made-up story. In addition, she knew that the benefits of lying were far greater than those gained from telling the truth. Ultimately, she was trapped living the life other people (her mother and the church) wanted her to live, and that is exactly what she did. She told everyone what she knew they wanted to hear.

Jeanette's will to protect Katy showed the extent of the love she had for her. Her recognition of the church's two sides—"the darker side" and the supposed lighter side—shows that she still believed in the goodness of the church but was aware of its insular ways. Forced to make a decision, Jeanette finally chose her commitment to her sexuality over her religious commitment. Then both her mother and the church disowned her. Her mother called in the pastor for assistance and he informed Jeanette that she was a victim of great evil, "afflicted and oppressed" and that the demon had returned— the demon of course being her sexuality (131). According to the pastor, all homosexuals were in fact demons and an abomination to God. Despite Jeanette's suffering, neither her mother nor the pastor ever doubts the wisdom of their behavior. They simply do not recognize that *they* are the oppressors.

Though these events altered Jeanette's relationship with her mother and her Christian Pentecostal church, it is important to note that Jeanette's decision did not alter her relationship with God. Her mother insisted that she made the house ill and brought evil into the church (127). This reveals the church's beliefs that all homosexuals are "ill" and inferior to those who are heterosexual. Jeanette did not fit within the boundaries of her mother and the church's heteronormative community. She realized that their decision was based on the fact she "loved the wrong sort of people . . . romantic love for another woman was a sin" (127). As she continued to analyze the situation, she acknowledged that she never had feelings for men and that she and her

mother were utterly different: “apart from [her] never wearing a skirt, [there was] nothing else in common between [her and a man]” (127).

Tired of battling both the church and her mother, Jeanette made the decision to leave: “I’m leaving the church, so you can forget the rest” (135). The act of her having to make a decision alone explicitly reveals the church’s attempt to alter who she is and more importantly, *her* ability to identify *who* she is. The pastor ordered her to give up all preaching, Bible study classes and any form of what he called influential contact. She was a disappointment to the values of their church and they feared her disease/infection would rub off on others. The church’s decision to label her sexuality as a disease only further proves their discrimination against her as an individual, which made her journey towards authenticity difficult.

But this did not deter Jeanette from declaring her independence and gaining a new found freedom. She failed to repent, again, and agreed to move out in search of her new self. Her mother responded with no remorse, “you’ll have to leave . . . I’m not having no demons here . . . the Devil looks after his own” (136). Refusing to be defeated, Jeanette insisted on remaining true to herself, “I knew I couldn’t cope, so I didn’t try. I would let the feeling out later, when it was safe. For now, I had to be hard and white . . . at that time I could not imagine what would become of me, and I didn’t care. It was not judgment day, but another morning” (136-37). Jeanette now understood that her life was not over, but in fact was just beginning.

After recognizing the incompleteness she felt from negating a part of her inner self just to please others, Jeanette found it easy to embrace herself whole—to achieve authenticity. An authentic life for her included practicing both her religion and her sexuality without any restrictions. With her new found dignity and identity, she managed to maintain her sanity and happiness without interruptions from the church or her mother. And most importantly, she

continued to worship God and respect her mother in her own way. There was little contact between them and when she was in her mother's presence, her mother acted like nothing had ever happened. Once again she refused to accept the reality of the situation—something Jeanette was finally able to accomplish. Although Jeanette's journey toward acceptance of her sexual identity, which determined her personal identity *and* authenticity, was difficult, she managed at last to define who she was for herself, defeating the church with both wisdom and persistence.

CHAPTER 4

Conclusion

In our culture, homosexuality is associated with deviance from accepted norms. This examination of the two novels by Kenan and Winterson, *A Visitation of Spirits* and *Oranges are not the only Fruit*, has exposed how the rigid religious views of the Black Baptist and Pentecostal Christian churches negatively affected the development of a homosexual's authenticity. Inspired by personal experience, these novels have admitted us into the lives of two homosexual teenagers, Horace and Jeanette, who experienced shame and rejection from society because of their sexual orientation. Both *A Visitation of Spirits* and *Oranges are not the Only Fruit* illustrated specific scenes within the church in which the pastor and members of the church community openly condemned their respective protagonists.

Unlike Jeanette, Horace remained alone through his journey to selfhood, mostly because he never fully accepted his identity as a homosexual, a gay man or a faggot. Therefore, his relationships with men brought him only sexual pleasure. Jeanette, on the other hand, experienced love as well as sex within her intimate connections. This emerges clearly in her willingness to defend both her female lovers. Jeanette never denied her love for Melanie, despite their repudiation by the church, and worked hard to protect Katy under similar circumstances. Having come to terms with her identity, she defended it whenever necessary. Unlike Jeanette, Horace repeatedly denied his identity publicly (although he did confess privately to Jimmy and Gideon). Indeed, moreover, instead of defending and/or protecting his lover as did Jeanette, Horace betrayed Gideon by physically assaulting him.

While both suffered from a similar set of obstructions to their identities, Horace and Jeanette arrived at opposite solutions to gain an authentic way of living. Jeanette never

contemplated suicide to achieve freedom, while Horace viewed it as his only way out. Ironically, Jeanette initially found her only way out through lying inauthentically but was able to discover her freedom through being true to herself. This reveals the negative effects that the church had on the two, forcing them to resort to death or to living a lie, far worse fates than loving someone of the same sex. Of course the church failed to see this.

The two authors employ styles that mirrored one another. Kenan interwove an omniscient narrator with journal-like confessions, while Winterson chose fairy tales to explain Jeanette's version of the church's extreme views. These two techniques provided alternate views and explanations of the conflicts at hand.

Finally, in neither novel do we see how the "oppressors" react to the actions of those they have oppressed. Thus, in *Oranges are not The Only Fruit*, Jeanette's decision to leave the church had no affect on her mother, while Horace's death had no impact on the community of Tim's Creek. Moreover, we never find out how Horace's family reacts, except for his cousin Jimmy, who felt great guilt after his death. Most importantly, in both situations, the communities go on as if nothing had ever occurred, which underscores their essential lack of humanity.

A Visitation of Spirits and *Oranges are not the only Fruit* were both published in the late 1980s in opposite parts of the world. Although attitudes about homosexuality have slightly changed today, and gay men and women enjoy a higher level of acceptance than previously, society still retains its essential view of homosexuality as "deviant." The current debates on gay marriage, as in California's Prop 8 or North Carolina's proposed constitutional amendment, prove this to be true. Yet increasing numbers of homosexuals have found ways to integrate their dual commitments to their homosexual identity and religion. Indeed, many churches have geared their message towards accepting everyone, with a particular emphasis on welcoming gays. Let

us hope that at some point the oppression stops, and no one will have to repeat the experiences of Horace or Jeanette in order to live fully and openly in the world.

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